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“An Agnostic Approach to Ivan the Terrible”¹

In order to demonstrate that everything significant about Ivan’s life is contested, this article attempts to catalog as many as possible of the contested major issues touching Ivan. The author defines what we do *not* know about Ivan as everything that is uncertain, disputed, contested, problematic, or unexplained, even or especially if some historians *think* we know it but cannot “prove” it beyond a shadow of a doubt. Consequently, the author is conflating problems of source provenance, definition of concepts, interpretation, context, contradiction, and comparison, and thus reducing suggestive analysis and probable explanation to the unknown. The author has organized this survey of our ignorance under thematic rubrics: Sources, Ivan’s Life, Political History, Social History, Religion and the Church, Economic History, Foreign Policy, and Ivan’s Legacy. Any historian who proposes to study Ivan should begin by realizing the degree of uncertainty attached to historical studies of his life and reign.

Keywords: Muscovy, Ivan the Terrible, oprichnina, Simeon Bekbulatovich, Kazan’, Livonian War, insanity

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“Everything significant about Ivan’s life is contested.”² The only consensus among historians who have studied Ivan is confined to a bare-bones chronology of events which does not extend to explanations of their causation or evaluations of their significance. Such chaos has characterized Russian sources about Ivan since his own lifetime through the seventeenth century, and modern Russian historiography since its inception in the eighteenth century. Monographs on Ivan finesse that situation by agreeing with one or another existing position on a disputed issue, presenting a new interpretation of an old question, or raising new questions. If a new book does raise a new question, it is a virtual certainty that some historians will claim that the issue is artificial or that the

¹ I wish to thank the anonymous reader for *RussianStudiesHu* for his thoughtful comments.

² CHARLES J. HALPERIN, *Ivan the Terrible: Free to Reward and Free to Punish* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2019), 5. DOI: [10.2307/j.ctvpbnqkd](https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvpbnqkd)

explanation provided is unconvincing. For these reasons it is difficult in reading a monograph about Ivan to appreciate the scope of disagreement among specialists concerning Ivan's life and reign. This article is an attempt to catalog as many as possible of these contested major issues touching Ivan.³ Of course this list is not exhaustive. I will not attempt to resolve any disagreement, but I will dismiss the legitimacy of two issues, just to be inconsistent, fully conceding that no unanimity exists on them either. This article defines what we do *not* know about Ivan as everything that is uncertain, disputed, contested, problematic, or unexplained, even or especially if some historians *think* we know it but cannot "prove" it beyond a shadow of a doubt.⁴ My focus is on matters of interpretation; I omit specific questions of chronology such as when an event took place or someone became a boyar. Consequently, I am conflating problems of source provenance, definition of concepts, interpretation, context, contradiction, and comparison, and thus reducing suggestive analysis and probable explanation to the unknown.

I have organized this survey of our ignorance under thematic rubrics: Sources, Ivan's Life, Political History, Social History, Religion and the Church, Economic History, Foreign Policy, and Ivan's Legacy. Of course some events and processes might be assigned to more than one rubric, so my choices are somewhat arbitrary.

I. Sources

Perhaps the most prominent question of source-study of Ivan's reign concerns the texts attributed to Ivan personally. We do not know if Ivan was literate. If Ivan was illiterate then he could not possibly have written not only his correspondence with Prince Andrei Kurbskii, but any letters attributed to him, whether diplomatic or domestic, such as his letter to the Kirillo-Beloozero Monastery, or his testament. Similarly, we do not know if Kurbskii was literate, and therefore whether he could have written any letter to Ivan, or to anyone else, or his *History of the Grand Prince of Moscow*. The question of Ivan's and Kurbskii's literacy overlaps the question of the authenticity of the correspondence between them. We do not know whether these works are

³ References to publications are intended as no more than bibliographic guides, not as indications of the "correct" answer to any historical question.

⁴ CHARLES J. HALPERIN, Chapter 19: "The Documented Ivan the Terrible: An Epistemological Exercise", in *ibid.*, *Ivan IV and Muscovy* (Bloomington, IN: Slavica Publishers Inc., 2019), forthcoming, imagines how our understanding of Ivan's life and reign would be revised if all problematic sources were discarded, a different exercise.

authentic, and no extant evidence is so decisive as to invalidate objections to either authenticity or inauthenticity. In theory all these texts could be apocryphal or later forgeries even if Ivan and Kurbskii were literate. Or they could read but not write, or they could write, but did not write these literary works. The texts could also be contemporary but still ghostwritten by someone other than their named authors. We cannot resolve these possibilities.⁵

We do not know if the texts attributed to “Ivan Peresvetov” influenced political “reform” (on “reform” see below) during the 1550s. We do not know if anyone read them at that time. We do not know if the texts referenced in the inventory of the Tsar’s Archive as by “Peresvetov” are the same texts which survive. We do not know if “Ivan Peresvetov” was a real person or a pseudonym. If “Peresvetov” was a pseudonym, we do not know whose. Some scholars still assert that Ivan composed some of “Peresvetov’s” works. We do not know when texts ascribed to Peresvetov, all of which survive only in seventeenth-century manuscripts, were composed, whether in the sixteenth or the seventeenth century.⁶

We do not know when the *Valaam Discourse* (*Valaamskaia beseda*) was written or by whom. We cannot explain its unusually anti-monastic point of view, or, given our ignorance of its dating and authorship, its political context.⁷

We do not know who compiled the *Book of Degrees* (*Stepennaia kniga*) or why it remained unfinished. We do not know if it was intended as criticism of Ivan and work ceased because its compiler was unable to rationalize Ivan’s blameworthy behavior.⁸

We do not know when the *Illustrated Chronicle Compilation* (*Litsevoi letopisnyi svod*) was compiled, or, to be precise, when each of the extant manuscript volumes of the *Illustrated Chronicle Compilation* was compiled, because clearly such a major project required years of works. We do not know who sponsored the project, the Muscovite Court or one of the bureaus, or the Russian Orthodox Church; who was the “editor” in charge of the project; or whether lay or

⁵ HALPERIN, *Ivan the Terrible*, 8., 68–78.

⁶ Ibid., 119–20.

⁷ Ibid., 122–24.

⁸ Ibid., 125–26.

clerical scribes and miniature painters worked on it, or both lay and clerical scribes and miniature painters. We do not know who wrote the interpolations about 1553 (discussed below). We do not know when or why the interpolations were added to the manuscript, and therefore we cannot determine what political axe was being ground. We do not know why the project as a whole remained unfinished and therefore whether the abandonment of work on the *Illustrated Chronicle Compilation* was the result of factors, such as the economy, that also dictated the abandonment of work on the *Book of Degrees*.⁹

We do not know whether Metropolitan Filipp's speeches to Ivan in his *vita* are reliable transcriptions of what he actually said.¹⁰

We do not know if Ivan's testament is authentic, or, even if so, if the existing text differs from the original.¹¹

II. Ivan's Life

We can dismiss the theory that after Grand Prince Vasili III's first wife, Solomoniia, was forcibly shorn, she gave birth to a son, Iurii-Georgii, who would have been legitimate heir to the throne ahead of his half-brother Ivan IV. Ivan cannot therefore have created the *oprichnina* to find and terminate him.¹² Only unsubstantiated conjecture, not reliable evidence, supports this theory.

Similarly without foundation, although the proposition has more supporters than the claim that Ivan IV had a half-brother, is the theory that Prince Ivan Fedorovich Telepnev Obolenskii Ovchin (Obolenskii for short) was Grand Princess Elena Glinskaia's (Vasili III's second wife and Ivan IV's mother) lover before her husband died, and that he, not Vasili III, fathered Ivan IV. The logistics of the Kremlin *terem* (women's quarters) make such a scenario impossible. The notion that Vasili III's "handlers" decided that he needed an heir, and if he could not provide one, a substitute could, rests on fictional premises about the life of the Muscovite court, such as the

⁹ Ibid., 126–29.; CHARLES J. HALPERIN, Chapter 1: "Why Did (Some) Chronicle-Writing Stop?" in idem, *Ivan IV and Muscovy*.

¹⁰ HALPERIN, *Ivan the Terrible*, 188–91.

¹¹ Ibid., 243–44.

¹² Ibid., 29.

existence of modern political “handlers.” I also reject the possibility that after Vasili III’s death Obolenskii was anything other than Elena’s political favorite, which also has many advocates. The Muscovite court was devoid of the sexual promiscuity of all other European courts of the time; Elena Glinskaia was not Catherine the Great. However, we do not know anything about Elena’s personality. Was she a vicious power-hungry schemer who neglected her son and had her uncle and Ivan’s uncles done away with so her personal and political behavior would go unchallenged, or a patriotic ruler and good mother who protected her son, the rightful heir, by any means possible? Rumors and court gossip do not constitute convincing evidence to these questions.¹³

We do not know if Elena Glinskaia was poisoned. Arguments based upon her autopsy rest upon assumptions, both chemical and political, that cannot easily be confirmed. The “atypicality” of poisoning as an instrument of Muscovite politics, save the uncontested case of appanage Prince Vladimir Andreevich, Ivan’s cousin, and part of his family, has been challenged by assertions that not only Elena Glinskaia, but also Ivan’s first wife, Anastasiia, other wives, Tasrevich Ivan, and Ivan IV himself, also died from poisoning, a body count that makes one wonder why no one hired a food-taster for the Kremlin.¹⁴

We do not know if Ivan’s childhood scarred him for life, determining his personality (sadistic) and prejudices (anti-boyar). There is no way to assess why Ivan could not overcome the traumas of his childhood and youth to become a very different kind of person and ruler than the portrayals of Ivan associated with this assertion.¹⁵

We do not know if Ivan was insane. There is no way to identify the dividing line between “suspicious” and “paranoid.” We have no way of extrapolating psychoses from public propaganda declarations. Ivan’s oft-attributed persecution complex, delusions of grandeur, egomania, and schizophrenia (divorce from reality) cannot be corroborated from non-existent documents about Ivan’s private life. Even leaving aside the issue of different definitions of insanity, for example Freudian versus non-Freudian, we cannot put Ivan on a couch and ask him about his dreams. If Ivan were psychotic, we cannot segregate which issues he could still deal with “normally,” as if he

¹³ Ibid., 30–31.

¹⁴ Ibid., 31–32.

¹⁵ Ibid., 32–33, 37–42.

were a rational, sane ruler. Although Ivan was cruel, the concept of sadism had not yet been formulated in the sixteenth century; nevertheless the behavior no doubt predated the concept. However, we cannot reliably assign to Ivan behavior which could be characterized as sadistic, that he *enjoyed* being cruel. I am not claiming that Ivan was sane, an equally unprovable contention, but that we do not and cannot know whether he was either sane or insane.¹⁶

We do not know if Ivan, an government official-cum-provocateur, or rival boyars were responsible for the 1546 boyar executions, in which the victims were denied last rites and therefore doomed to hell, or what crime they were accused of (the narrative is too vague), or whether they were guilty, because the chronicles are hopelessly contradictory.¹⁷

We do not know who first broached the idea that Ivan should marry. The chronicle decorously says Ivan, but, if he was sowing wild oats, the Russian Orthodox Church or the boyars might have wanted to “tame” him.¹⁸

If arranging Ivan’s first marriage was intended to curb his behavioral excesses, we do not know if it succeeded because we do not know if Anastasiia was the primary restraining influence on Ivan’s bad habits, so that upon her death Ivan felt free to indulge his degenerate passions. She could only have played that role if Ivan were truly in love with her, which is also impossible to document. Moreover, the priest Sylvester is also supposed to have served the function of Ivan’s behavioral conscience. Ivan freed himself on his own from Sylvester’s supervision, depriving him of access and influence. Sylvester became a monk. We do not know if either Anastasiia or Sylvester reined in Ivan’s baser instincts because we do not know if his baser instincts manifested themselves during the period between his marriage and Anastasiia’s death and Sylvester’s disgrace. We do not know if Anastasiia was poisoned. Ivan only claimed that she was long after her death. Autopsy evidence has been adduced to corroborate the crime, but it is subject to interpretation.¹⁹

We do not know why, upon Anastasiia’s death, Ivan relocated his brother Prince Iurii Vasil’evich,

¹⁶ Ibid., 7.

¹⁷ Ibid., 40–41.

¹⁸ Ibid., 48.

¹⁹ Ibid., 64.

who was married, Ivan's two minor sons, Tsarevich Ivan and Tsarevich Dmitrii, and a minor converted Tatar ward to separate households. All had been living in Ivan's household, presumably under Anastasiia's management. Was it to free his hands to engage in a degenerate lifestyle of drinking and debauchery? Only very late sources date his return to his pre-marital dissolute life to her death, while other sources insist that Ivan had never behaved even when he was married to Anastasiia.²⁰

We do not know how many times Ivan married, to whom, whether he took concubines, why he discarded any particular wife, or how he selected his spouses. Formally his wives were selected by a bride show controlled by the boyars. However, we do not know if interrogations as to the family history of prospective brides was intended to preclude a selection that agitated boyar factionalism or to identify a family history of physical or mental disorder indicative of the lack of God's favor that might impede that female from producing male heirs. We do not know if the bride show was for show, and someone, even Ivan, or some group other than the boyars determined the choice of bride. Was the selection of Mariia Cherkasskaia dictated by foreign policy considerations, to acquire a North Caucasus ally against Crimea? Why did Ivan's marital life degenerate in his later life, and the durability of his marriages fall so precipitously?²¹

We do not know whether Ivan was responsible for death of Tsarevich Ivan, either deliberately or accidentally. Was Tsarevich Ivan's death the result of a dispute between father and son over how Tsarevich Ivan's pregnant wife was dressed or over whether father or son should lead a relief expedition to break the siege of Pskov by King Stephen Batory of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth? Did Tsarevich Ivan die of natural causes in which his father took no part, or was Tsarevich Ivan poisoned?²²

We do not know whether Ivan died of natural causes or whether he was poisoned or strangled.²³

²⁰ Ibid., 64–65.

²¹ Ibid., 248–50.

²² Ibid., 250–52.

²³ Ibid., 256–57.

III. Political History

We do not know if the absence of abstract secular political theory affected Muscovite political behavior. No one in Muscovy could invoke natural law or consent of the government to question abuses of power by the ruler. We do not know if that intellectual gap inhibited Muscovites from acting the same way as other Europeans did who could and did invoke abstract secular political theory. We know that Muscovites objected to abuses of power, always, to be sure, by the ruler's officials or the elite, via petition, and that ecclesiastical theory denied the ruler the authority to impugn the true faith. Rulers could be criticized for violating custom and tradition. Muscovites of all classes did defend what they thought were their vested interests, even without a theoretical justification of "rights." Muscovy lacked a concept of a legal, constitutional regency council, but the accession of a minor ruler within the Muscovite house did not always produce a crisis.²⁴

We do not know why the boyars (and in part other segments of the elite such as the upper clergy and state secretaries) did not remove Ivan from office despite his atrocities, including whether the absence of abstract secular political theory rendered them politically impotent. We know that Ivan was not removed from office, let alone assassinated, but we do not know if anyone – boyar, Novgorodian, hierarch of the church, official, relative – *attempted* to remove Ivan from office or assassinate him. Certainly there were violent attempts, conspiracies or plots to overthrow sixteenth-century Tudor rulers. Whether all the supposed conspiracies and plots against Ivan were fictitious or whether any of them was real cannot be determined. We do know that the boyars were not servile when it came to protesting violations of the Precedence rights; boyars filed Precedence complaints at the slightest hint of a violation of their "honor" by placement in an office or ceremony beneath that of a socially inferior boyar, no matter how "servile" the language in which they humbly addressed the ruler.²⁵ "Servile" peasants and slaves ran away. "Servile" government officials refused, sometimes repeatedly, to carry out royal orders. At best "Muscovite servility" was inconsistent. Ivan might have "gotten away with" his atrocities if he were charismatic, but whether he possessed Weberian charisma is very difficult to establish.²⁶

²⁴ DANIEL ROWLAND, "Did Muscovite Literary Ideology Place Limits on the Power of the Tsar (1540s-1660s)?", *Russian Review* 49 no. 2 (April 1990): 125–55.; HALPERIN, *Ivan the Terrible*, 18. DOI: [10.2307/130009](https://doi.org/10.2307/130009)

²⁵ MARSHALL POE, "What Did Russians Mean When They Called Themselves 'Slaves of the Tsar'?", *Slavic Review* 57 no. 3 (Fall 1998), 585–608. DOI: [10.2307/2500713](https://doi.org/10.2307/2500713)

²⁶ CHARLES J. HALPERIN, Chapter 18, "Was Ivan the Terrible Charismatic?" in *ibid.*, *Ivan IV and Muscovy*.

We do not know if all boyars belonged to the Royal Council. No source ever identifies a boyar as someone who was *not* a member of the Royal Council. It is highly unlikely, indeed almost impossible, that all boyars could be gathered in one spot, even the Kremlin, at one time for a meeting of the Royal Council because some boyars would always be on assignment as commanders of a field army, as ambassadors abroad, as governors of provincial cities, in disgrace, or just ill. When Ivan traveled he always left some boyars in Moscow, so the question of whether a complete Royal Council could accompany him is moot.²⁷

We do not know who initiated policy, the ruler, the boyars, or officials, separately or together, in any period of Ivan's reign. Certainly during Ivan's minority, at least before he reached his mid-teens, he could not have played any role in policy formation. But during the "reforms," even during the *oprichnina* and its aftermath, we have no concrete evidence as to who decided policy issues. The narrative and documentary sources always attribute decisions to Ivan, even when he was a boy, and always insist that the boyars unanimously agreed with the ruler and each other. We know that state secretaries wrote position papers, but we do not know whether the policies advocated by those position papers were formulated by those state secretaries or whether they merely articulated policy positions proposed by Ivan and/or boyars. Ivan always had advisors, and certainly foreigners and post-Ivan Muscovites were always willing to blame this or that policy of Ivan's, especially the establishment of the *oprichnina*, on his advisors, or also in the case of the *oprichnina*, on his second wife, Mariia Cherkasskaia. We cannot verify such assertions.²⁸

We do not know if Muscovy had a "bureaucracy," and therefore had "bureaucrats" as opposed to just state officials. How one defines a "bureaucrat" remains debatable. No Weberian "bureaucracy" of purely rational officials in a meritocratic administrative structure has ever existed anywhere, nor did Weber claim it did. His concept of a rational, meritocratic bureaucracy was an ideal type. Muscovy had bureaus, eventually called *prikazy*, but whether the totality of central bureaus constituted a "bureaucracy" is another matter.²⁹

²⁷ HALPERIN, *Ivan the Terrible*, 21.

²⁸ Ibid., 22.

²⁹ Ibid., 22–23.

We do not know if the concept of centralization is applicable to changes in Muscovy's central and provincial administrative structure and the codification of laws. In part this is because we do not know if we can apply the concept of "reform" when such a concept was absent from Muscovite political discourse even during the so-called period of reforms of the 1550s. The Law Code of 1550 imposed a uniform legal system on all of Muscovy, but anti-banditry (*guba*) legislation and the creation of local-government bodies (*zemskaia* officials) delegated authority from the center to the provinces. If the local organs were carrying out central government policies, is this centralization? But if the administration of policy in itself allowed local society to revise and adapt centrally-mandated policy, is this decentralization? What is a "reform"? Does an incremental improvement in administration constitute a reform in the absence of a conscious, rational, long-term program at its foundation? Given the problems of transportation and communication across the vast distances within Ivan's Muscovy, does the theory of Muscovy as a hyper-centralized state make any sense?³⁰

We do not know who first proposed that Ivan be crowned "tsar." The chronicle attributes the idea to the precocious Ivan. Other candidates include Metropolitan Makarii, who performed the service; Ivan's mother's family, the Glinskies, and Ivan's future in-laws, the relatives of his fiancée Anastasiia, the Zakhar'ins. We do not know whether Ivan was anointed during the ceremony. Only the second redaction of the coronation ordo describes anointment, but neither redaction is a transcript of the actual coronation. We do not know if Ivan was crowned tsar (*basileus*) in order to conquer the Chinggisid tsar (*khan*) of Kazan'. Nogai Tatars flattered Ivan as a descendant of Chinggis (he was not) and as the White (Western, in the steppe color scheme) Khan, but did Ivan think that his identity included a Mongol element?³¹

We do not know if Third Rome ideology played any part in the coronation. Did Ivan think of himself as a Byzantine *basileus*, heir of the Byzantine Empire? Did Third Rome concepts influence any Muscovite government declaration, even if the term "Third Rome" never appeared in them?³²

We know that in 1553 Ivan was ill, the only time the chronicle mentions Ivan's health, but we do not know if his illness was or was feared to be life-threatening, or if so, if there was a succession

³⁰ Ibid., 24–26, 81–100.

³¹ Ibid., 43–45.

³² Ibid., 45–46.

crisis over whether he should be succeeded by his infant son Tsarevich Dmitrii, creating another dangerous minority, or by his cousin Prince Vladimir Andreevich. We do not know if any of the speeches or actions described in the interpolations in the *Tsar's Book* (*Tsarstvennaia kniga*) of the *Illustrated Chronicle Compilation* (*Litsevoi letopisnyi svod*) are credible, especially if on his deathbed Ivan supposedly delivered long speeches to his courtiers. We do not know how to interpret the actions of Alexei Adashev and the priest Sylvester, both supposedly members of the Chosen Council (*Izbrannaia rada*) (see below). Did Alexei Adashev's father speak for his son when he worried about another minority? Did Sylvester object when the boyars would not let Prince Vladimir Andreevich visit Ivan's bed because Sylvester favored the Staritskiis or because it was unseemly to bar a royal cousin from a familial courtesy? We do not know why in this narrative Metropolitan Makarii, who would have had to perform the coronation of Ivan's successor, Ivan's brother Prince Iurii Vasil'evich, and Prince Andrei Kurbskii are conspicuous by their absence.³³

We do not know if the "Chosen Council" actually existed, or if Kurbskii meant "chosen council," individuals, not an institution; if it was an institution, was it official or unofficial? if it existed at all, who were its members (usually Adashev and Sylvester are included)?; if it did exist, were its policies during the period of "reforms" intended to elevate the gentry and officials at the expense of the boyars, or did they envisage a social and political compromise among the entire elite? If the Chosen Council did exist, why did it lose influence? Because Ivan resented Sylvester's attempts to control his personal life? Because Ivan resented "Chosen Council's" restrictions on his absolute and arbitrary political authority as the "Chosen Council" sought to create an estate-representative government? Or because of a foreign policy dispute (see below on the Livonian War)?³⁴

We do not know if Precedence inhibited Ivan from promoting talented commoners to replace incompetent aristocrats who monopolized high military office and thus weakened the Muscovite military, or whether it divided the boyars by encouraging them to feud with each other over who had a higher "place," thus preventing them from restraining unlimited autocratic power, or both.³⁵ We do not know if Precedence was exclusively a boyar issue, because approximately one-quarter of the Precedence disputes during Ivan's reign and one-quarter of the participants in those disputes

³³ Ibid., 57–62.

³⁴ Ibid., 86–88.

³⁵ Ibid., 95–98.

(disputes could involve more than one person suing one person) were gentry, not boyars.³⁶

We do not know how the 1556 Decree on Service, stipulating that landowners owed one fully-armed mounted-warrior for every one hundred *chetverty* of land they held, was implemented. Did landowners with under one hundred *chetverty* of land still have to supply one mounted archer? Did landowners with over one hundred *chetverty* but under two hundred also have to supply only one mounted archer? Was the Decree superseded in 1571 by a new regulation which related quantity and quality of military serviced owed to size of cash allotments, not land allotments?³⁷

We do not know how important the concept of “autocracy” (*samoderzhavstvo*) was to Ivan.³⁸

We do not know if the Palm Sunday ritual demeaned the authority of the tsar by subordinating him to the metropolitan in the role of Jesus or enhanced the authority of the tsar by emphasizing his piety and humility, or both.³⁹

We do not know why Ivan created the *oprichnina*, or if someone else, as mentioned above, persuaded him to do so. Was Ivan acting out of sheer insanity, paranoia and a persecution complex? Was Ivan’s motive political? If so, against whom was the *oprichnina* directed? The boyars? The landowning base of the princely aristocracy? the Vladimir-Suzdal’ princely aristocracy? The entire Royal Court / Household (*Dvor*)? The appanage system (see below)? The autonomy of the Russian Orthodox Church, despite the fact Ivan permitted several monasteries to join the *oprichnina*? Did Ivan create the *oprichnina* in a vain attempt to avoid the ideological overload of the Muscovite ruler cult, because to be a good ruler he had to be a bad Christian? Did this solution fail because

³⁶ CHARLES J. HALPERIN, Chapter 8: “Who Was Entitled to Sue for Precedence?” in *ibid.*, *Ivan IV the Muscovy*.

³⁷ HALPERIN, *Ivan the Terrible*, 98–100.; O. A. KURBATOV, “‘Konnost’, liudnost’ i oruzhnost’ russkoi konnitsy v epokhu Livonskoi voiny 1558–1583 gg.”; A. M. BENTSIAOV, “Otzyv na stat’iu O. A. Kurbatova, “‘Konnost’, liudnost’ i oruzhnost’ russkoi konnitsy v epokhu Livonskoi voiny 1558–1583 gg.”; V. V. PENSKOI, “Zametki na poliakh stat’i “‘Konnost’, liudnost’ i oruzhnost’” russkoi konnitsy v epokhu Livonskoi voiny” and O. A. KURBATOV, “Otvety na voprosy: A. M. Bentsianov, “Otzyv na stat’iu O. A. Kurbatova, “‘Konnost’, liudnost’ i oruzhnost’” russkoi konnitsy v epokhu Livonskoi voiny 1558–1583 gg.”; V. V. PENSKOI, “Zametki na poliakh stat’i ‘Konnost’, liudnost’ i oruzhnost’ russkoi konnitsy v epokhu Livonskoi voiny.” in *Russkaia armia v epokhu Ivana Groznogo: Materialy nauchnoi diskussii k 455-letiiu nachala Livonskoi voiny* (St. Petersburg: *Istoriia voennogo dela: issledovaniia i istochniki*, 2018), http://www.milhist.info/spec_1/ (Accessed April 15, 2020), 1: 236–95., 2: 112–27., 2: 128–39., 2: 140–63.

³⁸ CHARLES J. HALPERIN, “Ivan IV as Autocrat (*samoderzhets*)”, *Cahiers du monde russe* 55: 3/4 (Juillet-décembre 2014): 197–213. DOI: [10.4000/monderusse.8000](https://doi.org/10.4000/monderusse.8000)

³⁹ HALPERIN, *Ivan the Terrible*, 130.

Ivan refused to give up his authority? Did the object of the *oprichnina* change? If so, how many phases did the *oprichnina* undergo and what was their timing? Was Ivan's motive for instituting the *oprichnina* religious, an attempt to prepare the Russian people for the approaching apocalypse? How many *oprichniki* were there eventually? What territories were included in the *oprichnina*, and when were they incorporated into it? Was the Aleksandrovskaia Sloboda pseudo-monastic brotherhood created simultaneously with the *oprichnina* itself or only later? Did it encompass all or only some *oprichniki*? Did the *oprichniki* carry dogs' heads and brooms on their horses? Was the *oprichnik* oath at all connected to magic? Why did Muscovite sources written in Muscovy during the *oprichnina* fail to mention its semiotic elements? Did contemporary Muscovites view the *oprichnina* only as a criminal enterprise, or also as a fact of life? Did Ivan abolish the *oprichnina* because it succeeded in weakening the political and economic power of whoever it was directed against, because it failed to protect Moscow from burning by the Crimeans in 1571, because, whether it had succeeded or failed, the *oprichniki* were no longer under Ivan's control, or because the *oprichnina* followed the dynamics of all reigns of terror, becoming so widely dispersed that inevitably it was directed at itself? Or did Ivan not abolish the *oprichnina* at all? Did Ivan, to mitigate public opprobrium, just rename it the "household" (*dvor*) and generalize its methods of governance to the entire country? Or did Ivan abolish the *oprichnina* in 1572 but then partially revive it when he put Simeon Bekbulatovich on the throne in 1575 (see below)? Did the *oprichnina* have a lasting effect on Muscovite society and political culture? If so, was it a positive or a negative role model for the use of mass terror as a political instrument?⁴⁰

We do not know if the boyar Ivan Fedorov-Cheliadnin participated in a plot to remove Ivan from the throne, or whether the plot only existed in Ivan's mind. We do not know if the looting of Fedorov-Cheliadnin's estates by the *oprichniki* was to fill *oprichnina* coffers or to terrorize the entire country. We do not know if members of all social classes living on those estates suffered equally, or if the *oprichniki* spared peasants and concentrated on Fedorov-Cheliadnin's military servitors.⁴¹

We do not know if Ivan ordered appanage Prince Vladimir Andreevich to commit suicide because

⁴⁰ HALPERIN, *Ivan the Terrible*, 72–87, 201–8, 210–15.; CHARLES J. HALPERIN, Chapter 3: "Ivan IV's Germans and the *Oprichnina*", in *ibid.*, *Ivan IV and Muscovy*.

⁴¹ HALPERIN, *Ivan the Terrible*, 168–69.

Ivan was against appanage system or because he mistrusted Prince Vladimir Andreevich personally. When Ivan had two living sons he promised the throne to the elder and an appanage to the younger son, and he promised appanages to any progeny from his proposed marriage to Mary Hastings. We do not know if Prince Vladimir joined a conspiracy to assassinate Ivan or depose him, and if so, when compromised, if he betrayed his fellow conspirators in the vain hope that Ivan would be grateful enough to spare his life. We do not know why did Ivan not order the deaths of all of Staritskii's children, or if Ivan was responsible for the later death of Staritskii's son Prince Vasilii Vladimirovich, who had received part of his father's appanage as an appanage.⁴²

We do not know if Ivan led a punitive campaign against Novgorod because the city's leaders, including Archbishop Pimen, had conspired both to turn the city over to King Sigismund of Poland-Lithuania and contradictorily to overthrow Ivan or because Ivan was the victim of Polish disinformation. We do not know if the Novgorod gentry, descendants of Muscovite gentry relocated in Novgorodian territory after Moscow's annexation of the city during the reign of Ivan IV's grandfather, Ivan III "the Great," had "gone native" and assimilated Novgorodian separatist political aspirations. We do not know if the artisans and merchants of Novgorod wanted to restore the Novgorod urban assembly (*veche*). We do not know if the Novgorodian clergy resented the authority of the metropolitan of Moscow over the archbishopric. Was Ivan just making up an excuse to refill the empty *oprichnina* treasury by looting the richest city in his realm, other than Moscow? If Ivan's object was Novgorod, why did his minions also assault other northwestern cities, like Pskov?⁴³

We do not know if Ivan Viskovatyi, conciliar state secretary (*dumnyi d'iak*) and sometime Keeper-of-the-Royal-Seal (*Pechatnik*) and chief of the Ambassadorial Bureau (*Posol'skii prikaz*) engaged in treasonous contacts with Crimea. We do not know whether with his dying breath when being tortured on Red Square in 1570 he denounced Ivan.⁴⁴

We do not know why Ivan installed converted Chingissid Simeon Bekbulatovich on the Muscovite throne in 1575 and removed him in 1576. Was Ivan trying to avoid assassination? To foil a plot to

⁴² Ibid., 191–93.

⁴³ Ibid., 193–97.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 198.

put the Crimean Khan Devlet Girei on the throne of Moscow? To create an authority who could authorize Ivan to partially recreate the *oprichnina*? Or was Ivan just playing a joke on himself by demonstrating his absolute authority to determine who ruled Muscovy?⁴⁵

We do not know if the commemorative lists of his victims that Ivan sent to monasteries with contributions for prayers in their memory constituted an admission of guilt on his part, conceding that some of those victims were innocent, or if he was trying to pacify the spirit of his dead son Tsarevich Ivan, unhappy at his murder by his father's hand.⁴⁶

IV. Social History

We do not know if Muscovite “society” was subordinated to state needs, if Muscovy had corporate estates with any autonomy or power, or if the Muscovite government at will mobilized all social classes exclusively for state needs. Not all status or occupations were inherited in Muscovy, because upward and downward social mobility was not common but did occur, so clearly Muscovy was not a caste society. If an “estate” requires a legal definition, legal rights, and a corporate structure, Muscovy had no estates. The Royal Council eventually included gentry and officials; it was not a boyar “estate” or class institution. But social classes with vested interests can function from custom as well as law. Gentry (*deti boiarskie*) had the legal right to be judged only by the tsar, not by local authorities, and peasants had the legal right to depart from the lands on which they lived at a specified time and upon meeting specified financial obligations. Were these “class” or “estate” rights, or just government favors, to be issued or withdrawn at government convenience? Indeed, did Muscovites have a conception of “society” (*obshchestvo*), of the people of the realm apart from the ruler? Sources refer to the “tsar’s and the land’s (*zemskie*) affairs.” We do not know if Muscovites thought of the “land” as Muscovite “society.” Can classes or estates have influence without having power?⁴⁷

We do not know if lay elite landowners, the boyars and gentry, were literate. If they could not understand, let alone read, Slavonic, then how much Scripture could they comprehend and how

⁴⁵ Ibid., 245–47.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 253–55.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 26–28.

much Christian theology could they acquire? Did lay witnesses to documents, who “affixed their hands” (*ruku polozhil*) to them if and only if they “knew letters” (*gramota umeet*), know how to sign their names? If so, does that mean that they must have been literate, because no one was taught to write unless and until he had been taught to read? Further, if so, who taught them their letters in the absence of schools?⁴⁸

We do not know if possession of a seal, to affix to documents in lieu of a signature, was a social marker of elite status if even state peasants could have and use seals. How does the use of personal seals by the same men in their personal and public affairs as officials reflect elite perception of the presence or absence of a division between the private and public spheres of life?⁴⁹

If the *oprichnina* constituted a social pathology, a criminal rampage by the *oprichniki*, largely gentry, exploiting their exemption from the law granted by Ivan, we do not know if this behavior was produced by changes in Muscovite society over the previous century. Was *oprichnik* violence the product of the anxiety, insecurity, and disorder resulting from a century of state-directed social engineering which entailed significant social change and upward and downward social mobility for all classes of Muscovite society, but most threatened the gentry socially (the risk of falling in slavery), economically (the risk of bankruptcy), and demographically (the risk of death in warfare)? We do not know if the *oprichnina*, by placing the *oprichniki* above the law, gave its corp, men accustomed to violence, *carte blanche* to express their frustrations and animosities against all of Muscovite society, including their own gentry class. It is a commonplace in historiography that the *oprichnina* was a cause of the social disorder of the Time of Troubles (*Smutnoe vremia*), but we do not know if social disorder was also a cause of the the *oprichnina*.⁵⁰

V. Religion and the Church

We do not know if Ivan and his Court were religious. We know that Ivan and his courtiers behaved like believers, attended the liturgy, went to confession and took communion, married in church,

⁴⁸ Ibid., 54–56.

⁴⁹ CHARLES J. HALPERIN, Chapter 5, “Lay Elite Seals: Who Had Them and When They Used Them”, in *ibid.*, *Ivan IV and Muscovy*.

⁵⁰ HALPERIN, *Ivan the Terrible*, 215–36.

had their children baptized, and were buried in monasteries or churches. We know that Ivan and his court observed the dietary rules of Orthodox Christianity, and more than likely the rules for sexual abstinence during Lent, other fasts, and some weekdays. We know that Ivan and his courtiers donated funds, lands, and moveable goods to monasteries and churches and owned icons and crosses. But we do not know and cannot know what they *believed* because we have no private statements of belief from Ivan or boyars. Depending upon what actions we attribute to Ivan, we could argue that he could not have been a true Christian because of his sins, but by that criterion there has probably never been a true Christian ruler in Russia or anywhere else.⁵¹

We do not know if the Council of One Hundred Chapters (*Stoglav*) had any effect upon the religious life of Muscovite society. Did the piety of the parish priests, monks, or laity improve? Did the authority of the bishops increase in fact, not just on paper? Did artists refrain from following unauthorized models in painting icons? Did the quality of copying of scriptural and liturgical books improve by relying upon better manuscripts as sources? Were primary schools established to teach literacy?⁵²

We do not know how to measure the role of the clergy, parish and monastic, in the non-religious daily lives of the congregants. Does the discretionary use as witnesses to secular documents of clergy, particularly “spiritual fathers” (*dukhovnye ottsy*), who were religious advisors and not necessarily priests, attest to the respect accorded clergy by the laity, or only to lay opportunism and deference to social convention?⁵³

We do not know whether the traditional paradigm of the conflict within the monastic clergy between the Josephans, followers of Iosif Volotskii, and the Trans-Volga Elders or Non-Possessors, inspired by Nil Sorskii, is viable. Were there two church “parties” that functioned over three generations, from the late fifteenth century through Ivan IV’s reign?⁵⁴

⁵¹ Ibid., 50–54.

⁵² Ibid., 102–9.

⁵³ CHARLES J. HALPERIN, Chapter 6, “Clergy in the Documentary Life of the Muscovite Laity”, in *ibid.*, *Ivan IV and Muscovy*.

⁵⁴ The interpretation presented in HALPERIN, *Ivan the Terrible*, 104–6. is not maintained consistently throughout the rest of the book. See *ibid.*, “Josephans and Trans-Volga Elders during the Reign of Ivan IV”, paper, Association for Slavic, East European and Eurasian Studies Convention, Washington, DC, November 5–8., 2020, forthcoming.

We do not know if heresy was a serious problem in mid sixteenth-century Muscovy or only a marginal issue, exaggerated by its opponents. We do not know what accused heretics such as Feodosii Kosoi, Artemyi, and Fedor Bashkin, really believed, because our sources either come from their opponents or may contain disingenuous remarks by the accused induced by fear or torture. Whether foreign influence from the Reformation played a role in Muscovite heresy also remains unclear.⁵⁵

VI. Economic History

We do not know how much of the Muscovite economy depended upon coinage or to what extent the Muscovite economy was still a natural economy based upon labor services, payment of rent and dues in kind, and barter. We do not know how a Muscovite could physically pay very large sums of money, hundreds of rubles, even thousands, when the “ruble” was only a denomination of account and the largest coin in use was the kopeck, one or two hundred to the ruble, which meant that someone had to transmit very heavy sacks of thousands of tiny coins. We do not know where the silver in the kopeck came from, because Muscovy had no silver mines during Ivan’s reign. Did Muscovy have a significantly favorable balance of trade to import the silver it needed to mint so many coins? We have no statistics.⁵⁶

We do not know when, where (in Novgorod or Moscow) or by whom the first redaction of the *Book of Household Management* (*Domostroi*) was composed. If it was based upon a translation of a foreign model, no one has identified that text, which would have had to be adjusted for Orthodox Christianity and the Muscovite diet. We do not know who constituted the intended audience of the first redaction of the *Book of Household Management* or of the later redaction by the priest Sylvester. We cannot conceptualize the ethos of the text, which strongly diverges from the ascetic focus in Russian Orthodoxy.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ HALPERIN, *Ivan the Terrible*, 109–14.

⁵⁶ HALPERIN, *Ivan the Terrible*, 133–39.; CHARLES J. HALPERIN, Chapter 14: “Ivan IV’s Coinage”, in *ibid.*, *Ivan IV and Muscovy*.

⁵⁷ HALPERIN, *Ivan the Terrible*, 139–43.

VII. Foreign Policy

We do not know the prime motive, whether national security, religion, or economics, behind the Muscovite conquest of the Kazan' Khanate. Was the primary goal to permanently deter Kazan' raids on Muscovite territory? To liberate captive Muscovite slaves? To spread Christianity among Muslims and nativist religious adherents? To secure, with the additional conquest of the Astrakhan' Khanate, complete control of the Volga River trade to enrich the Muscovite economy with the oriental trade to Iran and Central Asia? Was the conquest of Kazan' "imperial? Did it transform Muscovy into an "empire" with Kazan' as a "colony"? Was Ivan an "imperialist"? Would answers to the question of Muscovite imperialism depend upon whether one asked a Muscovite or a Kazan' Tatar?⁵⁸

We do not know why Ivan launched the Livonian War. Did he do so to boost his ego by territorial expansion, to validate Muscovite ideology by compelling foreign powers to recognize his title of "tsar," to loot Livonia for profit rather than to conquer it, to enhance the profitability of Muscovite Baltic trade by breaking the Livonian middleman monopoly so Muscovy could trade directly with other Baltic countries, or to open a window to the West so Muscovy could import superior European technology and culture? Did Ivan's goals change as a result of the unexpectedly easy early success of Muscovite armies in Livonia? Was Muscovite diplomacy deficient in not preventing other Baltic powers from intervening in the war? Was there a division of opinion among the elite over whether to invade Livonia or to fight Crimea? Was invading Crimea to reduce it to vassal status or annex it a viable option in the sixteenth century, given the logistical problems and the might of the Ottoman Empire? Why did Muscovy lose the Livonian War? Was that defeat Ivan's fault? How did occupying Livonia affect the Muscovite gentry and musketeers (*strel'tsy*) relocated there, who later had to repatriate to Muscovy?⁵⁹ We do not know.

We do not know Ivan's goal in pursuing election to the throne of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Did he want to become King of Poland and Grand Duke of Lithuania, or was he

⁵⁸ Ibid., 145–48.; CHARLES J. HALPERIN, Chapter 6, "Two Imperial Interpretations of Ivan the Terrible" and Chapter 10, "Ivan the Terrible from the Point of View of Tatar History", in *ibid.*, *Ivan the Terrible in Post-Soviet Russian Historiography*, unpublished manuscript.

⁵⁹ HALPERIN, *Ivan the Terrible*, 149–62, 241–42.

just using the negotiations to further his acquisition of Livonia, either by assisting an ally to assume the Polish throne, or by promoting the partition of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in which he would take over the Grand Duchy of Lithuania as well as Kiev (Kyiv) and other territories of Kievan Rus’?⁶⁰

VIII. Ivan’s Legacy

We do not know if Ivan changed the course of Russian history, diverting it from a path toward constitutional democracy to one of oriental despotism, or if Muscovy’s political future had already been determined by long-term causes which Ivan could not alter. Were Ivan’s idiosyncratic excesses no more than sidebar to history?⁶¹

We do not know whether was Ivan “exceptional,” atypical, or non-normative, compared to previous and subsequent rulers of Muscovy or compared to his contemporaries in Europe and Asia. Certainly he violated Muscovite political culture in some ways, but then again some of his innovations in Muscovite political culture (coronation as tsar, conquest of Kazan’) were retained by his successors and others avoided (the *oprichnina*, the Simeon Bekbulatovich episode). Is it a mistake to treat “political culture” synchronically rather than diachronically?⁶² There is, to understate the case, no consensus on Ivan’s legacy in Russian history or whether he was a positive or negative role model for his successors, from 1584 to the present.⁶³

IX. Conclusion

Ivan remains an enigma, unknown, perhaps unknowable. No historian is ever going to “solve” Ivan the Terrible, but any historian who proposes to study Ivan must begin by realizing the degree of uncertainty attached to historical studies of his life and reign.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 239–41.

⁶¹ ALEXANDER YANOV, *The Origins of Autocracy. Ivan the Terrible in Russian History*, tr. Stephen Dunn (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981); DANIIL AL’, *Ivan Groznyi: Izvestnyi i neizvestnyi. Ot legend k faktam* (St. Petersburg: Izdatel’skii Dom “Neva”, 2005); NANCY SHIELDS KOLLMANN, “Muscovite Russia 1450–1598”, in GREGORY L. FREEZE, ed., *Russia. A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 31–62.

⁶² CHARLES J. HALPERIN, “Ivan the Terrible and Muscovite Political Culture”, in *Seeing Muscovy Anew: Politics - Institutions - Culture, In Honor of Nancy Shields Kollmann*, ed. VALERIE A. KIVELSON, MICHAEL FLIER, DANIEL ROWLAND, and ERIKA MONAHAN DOWNS (Bloomington, in: Slavica Publishers, Inc., 2017), 49–65.

⁶³ HALPERIN, *Ivan the Terrible*, 258–63.